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ABSTRACT

For college-level American History, in the high school advanced placement (AP) program and on university campuses, these are the best of times and the worst of times. For the American History AP program, the early 1970's were difficult times, with the examinations under attack as elitist and irrelevant to contemporary problems. The program attempted to meet this challenge by concentrating more on social history, including minority studies, and establishing a new type of examination question, the document-base question (DBQ), designed to test students' ability to analyze historical information. However, by the late 1970's, the DBQ had become too long and arduous, requiring students to analyze 20 documents in 40 minutes. In 1981, the American History AP Committee changed the format of the exams, limiting the number of documents students were required to analyze in the DBQ and changing the focus of that question to test outside historical knowledge rather than analytical skills. Currently, there are several problems with the American History AP exam: the amount of time teachers have to cover the span of United States history, failure of teachers to cover economic history, and increasing pressure from college professors to focus on social history. At the college level, the number of students majoring in history has dropped dramatically in the past decade, largely because students are now encouraged to enter professional programs. It is important that history professors maintain high quality courses, and encourage students to take history, perhaps as a double major, for the sake of becoming well educated individuals and for their own satisfaction. (LP)

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AP AMERICAN HISTORY AND THE HISTORY MAJOR: Keeping Body and Soul Together

Paul S. Holbo*

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For college-level history, in the schools and on campuses, these are the best of times and the worst of times. I shall develop this theme first by reviewing Advanced Placement in the schools, then by turning to the colleges. I must warn you that I shall both reminisce and quote statistics to make my point, which is, of course, in the spirit of the new social history.

In 1971 I completed my term as chief reader of American History AP. It had been a difficult five years, and I was ready to be put out to pasture. This was the time of Vietnam, campus protests, urban riots, and demands for changes in national and social priorities. The AP Program felt these and other pressures. Educational radicals called for the "deschooling of America," decried elitism as in the AP Program, sneered at the pursuit of excellence, and denounced standardized testing. The evangels of egalitarianism had their counterparts on campus and in the schools. Distribution requirements disappeared, and grade inflation triumphed. Education itself sometimes disappeared, too, which was a cause for rejoicing in certain quarters; in the euphoria of the moment, the activists gave little note to the decline of public

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support and the shrinking of educational budgets. Even moderate educational reformers insisted that courses be made more relevant and that American history in particular recognize social groups that allegedly had hitherto been neglected.

The College Board did not waver in its support of the AP Program despite the nattering Naderites and the fact that the program invariably ran a deficit. Faith that this was a good program was used to balance the accounts. Meanwhile, the College Board's Committee of Examiners (as we were then called), aided by ETS staffers, did what we could to make the tests relevant, and the Board and ETS arranged for special reporting of the protest papers that some students substituted for essays on the examination. We did our test constructing almost too well, for we began to receive complaints from teachers and students that the examinations were weighted too heavily toward minority, social, and cultural history. Still, I remember with some satisfaction a question that we devised on urban history, which permitted students to write an essay on any one of a number of specified American cities at selected times. The question was difficult to draft, and establishment of standards for uniform grading even more difficult; but readers were impressed by the knowledge of some students about the histories of such places as Los Angeles and Salt Lake City.

As for the protest papers, one of my tasks was to read them all. Even in the worst year, 1970, the number was smaller than we had anticipated, partly because the nature of the test eliminated the grounds for complaint. I still remember one paper written by a student who had obviously come prepared to

protest; he was honest enough to write that the test gave him nothing to object but he stated that he intended to protest anyway.

By 1971 the political atmosphere began to lighten. It appeared that education in the United States might survive after all, and the College Board's Committee of Examiners worked hard to develop new kinds of questions. We attempted to write linked multiple-choice questions; the idea was that such questions, if developed carefully, might replicate some features of an essay examination. I still think that this can be done, but the effort died a-borning. The main reason was that the committee turned in a quite different direction and finally reached agreement that instead a question should be developed that would demonstrate whether AP students had learned to analyze documents and write research papers. Many persons contributed to the development of what became known as the DBQ, or document-based question, but several should be singled out for their efforts: William Hochman of Colorado College, Father Giles Hayes of the Delbarton School, Steve Klein of ETS, and, later, Harry Scheiber of the University of California and Robert Bannister of Swarthmore College.

I left the committee during the early stages of creating the DBQ, relieved that I had fulfilled my major responsibility (i.e., managing the examination reading) without any serious glitches, without any lost papers. The seventy-five college and secondary school teachers who worked with me in 1971 had actually read 12,695 sets of examinations, each of which included three essays. It was a herculean task--probably the

limit of what could be done, I thought. In any event, American History AP seemed to have reached a plateau in size after rapid growth in the mid- and late-1960s.

During the next few years I was busy with budgetary crises as Dean of Liberal Arts at Oregon but I continued to perform some missionary work on occasion for a program I greatly admired. I watched the development of the DBQ with particular interest. I was, for instance, impressed by the imaginative and challenging DBQ of 1976, which asked whether American society was becoming more democratic from the 1750s to the 1780s as evidenced by life in Wethersfield, Connecticut. Jackson Turner Main, then on the Committee of Examiners, helped to shape the question. The selected documents included visual materials and legal, property, and voting records. Thus AP students had to use the same kinds of materials that leading historians were utilizing. Few college freshmen or even upper-division students have faced so demanding and sophisticated a test.

I also began to notice how long and arduous the DBQs were becoming. Students no longer had to read, reflect upon, and, within forty minutes, write an essay analyzing a mere fifteen or so documents; they had to deal with twenty and even more documents. I heard repeated complaints from AP teachers and students that the question was becoming an ordeal. And when I discovered that some AP teachers were shrewdly instructing their students in methods of quick appraisal and skillful annotation, I wondered how AP readers could evaluate such papers. The chief readers during the 1970s and early 1980s--

Robert Bannister, John Niven of the Claremont Graduate School, and Alden Vaughan of Columbia University--and their assembled colleagues somehow managed to cope with the mass of documents and the students' use or misuse of them. I admired their skill in evaluating the examination papers all the more as I learned that the number of papers was rising rapidly.

The first jump came in 1974, with a one-year surge of about 12 percent to 14,331. Each year thereafter was much the same: 12 percent growth in 1975, 16 percent in 1976, 14 percent in 1977, 15 percent in 1978, 15 percent in 1979, 14 percent in 1980, 12 percent in 1981. These increases were truly astounding given the fact that the base figures were getting so large. By 1981, the number of examinations in American history had reached 35,999.

Soon after the AP reading in the summer of 1981, I agreed to the request of the College Board that I return to the Committee of Examiners, renamed the Test Development Committee, and serve as its chair. The occasion was not so much a feeling of nostalgia on the Board's part, I think, as it was a notion that I was so experienced in dealing with budgetary crises that I might appreciate the budgetary problems that the program faced at that moment. The major strategy that we employed was to change the format of the examination; this involved setting the number of multiple-choice questions at 100, reducing the number of essay questions from three to two, lengthening one essay to fifty minutes, retaining the DBQ at forty minutes, and providing a fifteen-minute required period for students to study the documents and plan their essays. Although the full

exam remained at three hours, this arrangement made possible important economies in time and money at the reading, increased the statistical validity of the total test, and improved the quality of the essays. Readers have uniformly proclaimed the compulsory fifteen-minute study time a marked improvement in the test.

But the changes also addressed academic problems. Teachers, students, and readers alike had complained that the DBQ had gotten out of control, and careful analysis by the Test Development staff at ETS, led by Steve Klein, provided evidence that the DBQ was not doing what had originally been desired. (See Mr. Klein's article in the AP column, Perspectives, May 1983.) The result was a marked change in the nature of that examination. As Klein explained, as early as 1975 the examiners had abandoned the DBQ's original requirement that students assess the relevance and reliability of evidence in the documents and settled for analysis of the documents and synthesis in the essays. Many if by no means all teachers and readers were skeptical about whether the DBQ was testing historical knowledge and concluded that it had become a sophisticated new aptitude test. In addition, the Test Development Committee had found the preparation of the lengthy DBQ to be an extraordinarily difficult and time-consuming task.

After several years of discussion, the debate over the DBQ came to a head in committee meetings during the autumn of 1981. The unanimous conclusion was that the number of documents must be reduced to around seven or eight, and that students must display more outside historical knowledge--that

is, information that could not be derived from the documents. Drafting the new test proved to be difficult; there was no backlog of alternative questions, and the Committee operated under severe time constraints in selecting documents, checking them, and preparing and editing the question. The fact that the entire format of the 1982 examination was to be altered further complicated our chore. But, after the most arduous committee sessions I have ever participated in, we sent the examination to press in time for distribution at the May, 1982 exam date.

Why did we agonize so much over our work when, as everyone knows, most teachers and professors make up tests in a few minutes by just reaching into a file drawer and pulling out some old questions? To do that on a test that is taken by thousands of students scattered across the country, and even around the world, would be disastrous. The Committee must take great care to insure fairness of choice, some semblance of breadth, coverage in subject matter and chronology, and as much precision in language as possible. Students of the teacher or professor who writes lazy questions directing them to "describe" or "discuss" something, or whose questions are obscure, might learn during the year how to read between the lines, or may even ask the teacher or professor during the test what the question means. That is not possible on a nationally administered test. The slightest error in language can have catastrophic consequences and lead to angry recriminations by victimized students and teachers. (For additional information on this subject see Robert Blackey's articles "A Guide to the

Skill of Essay Construction in History," Social Education, March 1981, and "How Advanced Placement History Essay Questions Are Prepared--And How Yours Can Be Too," Perspectives, November 1982.)

I was anxious about the 1982 question. The sophisticated theme involving John Brown and sectional strife that Bob Bannister originally devised had lost something when the number of documents that could be employed was cut back drastically. We also worried that AP students, who had been trained by teachers to annotate many documents, would now not bring in the outside historical information we demanded. ETS sent out two mailings to all schools involved; but mail often stops at the principals' or counsellors' desks, and we feared that some teachers and students would not get the message that the DBQ and the general format had changed. I worried, too, that students would find answering 100 hard multiple-choice questions exhausting, as I myself did when I took the test.

So it was with considerable trepidation that I went to nearby South Eugene High School on the day of the examination. South has had AP courses for years, and many of the students there are very bright; nevertheless, I wanted to see how they did and talk with them after the exam. I was relieved to observe that, with a few exceptions, they did not appear rushed to finish the multiple-choice portion. And, afterwards, a number of them told me that they liked the new format. (Their teacher, incidentally, had not gotten the ETS letters, but the students accidentally had learned of the changes during exchange sessions with another local school.)

They recognized the DBQ for what it really had become, a fairly standard subject matter question.

As it turned out, my sample of students was misleading. Readers at Princeton were disappointed by the performance nationally, for many students, drilled in answering the old, lengthy DBQs, insisted on writing quick summaries of the documents and did not include nearly the amount of outside historical information we wanted. One could not blame them for being so cautious; after all, an entire year's credit depended on their performance.

But we were not happy with what we found. Still, almost all readers approved the change in format, applauded the fifteen-minute reading and preparation period as an improvement, and agreed that we must try the shorter DBQ again.

We did try again. We had no alternative other than to abandon the DBQ altogether, which we had actually considered, and we had gotten a start on what became the 1983 Populism DBQ. Happily, I can report that the students' performance in 1983 improved. On the DBQ essays there was less summarizing of documents and somewhat more outside historical information. Part of the remaining problem was our own fault. Even though there were only eight documents, readers told us that we had selected them so skillfully that it was difficult for students to know something that was not treated in the documents. And, at the same time, we somehow had managed, as in the 1982 DBQ, to omit the South. With everything else they had to do on the money question and the railroads, only very few students remembered also to mention the crop-lien system and the Wheel

and Alliance. Yet, almost all readers expressed the view that the Test Development Committee at last was on the right course with the DBQ.

The fact that American History AP had grown once again, from 38,286 test takers in 1982 to a phenomenal 43,844 in 1983, was further reason for self-congratulations. AP had not taken over American education. There are, after all, 22,000 schools in the United States with well over a million college-bound graduates yearly. But the program clearly was well established and making its mark. At the University of Michigan, for instance, 1,703 freshman entered in the fall of 1983 with AP credit in one or another subject; the figure at Stanford was 1,651.

I have been asked whether, with this growth, the AP Program has maintained the quality it had twelve years ago, when fewer than a third as many students took the American history test. Similar doubts have surfaced from the very beginning of AP. Originally some persons questioned whether sixteen-, seventeen-, and eighteen-year-olds could handle college-level material; the fact that the first AP candidates came from a handful of elite New England and Middle Atlantic prep schools somewhat allayed complaints. The same refrain was heard when the program spread from Andover, Exeter, Kent, and Lawrenceville to Woodberry Forest and the Newman School, and to leading public schools such as Shaker Heights, New Trier, Beverly Hills, Lowell, and South Eugene; but again it helped that everyone knew that these schools had outstanding teachers and very bright students.

By the mid-1960s it was clear that students from many other schools were doing equally well on the test. I remember when a group of curious readers managed to learn that some particularly outstanding papers came from the Punahou School in Honolulu. For a time in the late 1960s, I thought that growing participation by large urban high schools and parochial schools had increased the number of poor papers; whatever reality there was to my impressionistic assumption soon disappeared, as the newly participating schools adjusted to AP's standards. My distinct feeling after reading papers during the last two years is that the quality of student essays is as high with 43,000 participants as it was when there were only 12,000. I suspect that outstanding individual papers are as likely to come from Bountiful, Utah, as they are from the Bronx High School of Science or Groton School. Some schools obviously have more bright students and skilled teachers. But there is a great deal of talent across the country. I continue also to be impressed with the quality of AP teachers I meet at the reading and at conferences. They are highly motivated about their students and deeply involved in teaching.

Much of what I have written would, I think, be supported by the college professors who take part in the reading. Each is asked his or her impression of the students' performance at the end of the reading. Moreover, there are equator questions in the multiple-choice examination that allow ETS statisticians to judge the ability of each year's class compared to the previous year. This information is used in cutting the curve (i.e., determining the grades--1 through 5--to be reported).[1]

If you look at the final test statistics over the years, you will see occasional shifts in performance levels; but it is clear that the overall quality of AP has been maintained despite the incredible growth in numbers.

So, is all well in the world of AP American History? It is not. I add that I hope not, for in complacency would lie disaster. There are a number of problems in the American History program. I shall mention just the most serious and then turn briefly to the somewhat different but even more serious problems at the colleges and universities.

The first difficulty is that the AP American History teacher has an almost impossible task in terms of coverage. The best way to discover this is to listen to AP teachers talk to each other. Their initial question will often be: How far are you in your course? They feel that they are in a race to get from the beginnings of American history to 1945 and beyond. College professors simply do not have the same problem because they make up their own tests and can adjust their questions accordingly. AP teachers have to prepare their students for a nationally administered exam covering a full year's work. So, when they skip a topic or cover something thinly, they are taking a chance.

Many teachers, alas, skim over the colonial period. This became apparent in June, 1983 when we read the responses to the

[1]The entire 1984 American History examination will be made public; this includes the multiple-choice questions. This is the first time in years that the full test is to be disclosed. The equator questions on this test, of course, cannot be used again.

question on the Puritans. There were some good essays, but there also were many poor ones--based more often on a reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Arthur Miller in an English class, it would appear, than on anything substantial historically. Many students viewed the Puritans as something akin to early American Nazis.

There is a problem at the other chronological end, too, since the exam is given around the 18th or 20th of May, just before some schools conclude their year, while others go on for several weeks or even a month after the test. How do those teachers reach the postwar period by exam time?

In terms of substantive content, students' performances continue to be weak in economic history--though this was not true in 1983 in a question about the 1920s and 1930s--and in anything but fairly simple social history, except perhaps for recent black history. On the positive side, in 1983 students' performances were especially good on a question on early diplomatic history.

Again, college teachers adjust their tests to what they teach. AP teachers enjoy no such luxury. Do AP teachers teach less well? Numerous experiments demonstrate that AP students perform better than college students on the same AP tests.

Now there is increased pressure from some college historians for AP teachers to concentrate more heavily on the new social history. Such advocates should remember how hard the AP teacher's task already is. The AP test permits considerable flexibility, and teachers can certainly develop thematic courses and exclude certain kinds of topics when they

include others. Nevertheless, teachers will feel pressure to provide some breadth in coverage--including political as well as social history--and students should demand it, or complain if they do not get it.

I am not convinced, moreover, that the new social history will be particularly popular with students. But I turn now to the college survey course and the history major. Both are, I believe, in great difficulty, even after and perhaps because of a decade of infiltration by the new social history. The evidence for the difficulty that the survey course is in can be found in the many articles written in AHA Perspectives. Many remedies have been tried, and apparently few have worked.

Meanwhile, the number of bachelor's degrees in history has dropped from 45,631 awarded in 1971-72 to only 19,601 in 1980-81. Recall that the number of candidates in AP American history nearly reversed these figures during the same period. So who is in trouble? And who should be advising whom about what to include in history courses? Perhaps we should have some conferences or panels during which high school teachers help college history professors deal with their serious problem. If the trend keeps up, the history major may disappear.

I am, of course, being intentionally provocative. The problem in college history programs cannot be laid entirely at the door of the new social historians. Some of them undoubtedly teach well and attract students. But some of them, as well as some of their traditionally minded colleagues, do not concentrate sufficiently on their teaching.

In all fairness, moreover, the problem of decline in majors is by no means limited to history degrees but crosses the spectrum of arts and sciences programs. We have all read the anxious paragraphs in A Nation at Risk and similar reports focusing particularly on the deficiencies in the teaching of the sciences, engineering, and computer sciences, and in some studies on shortcomings in foreign language instruction as well. The statistics on majors back up these concerns. Mathematics degrees declined, in the years 1971-72 to 1980-81, from 23,848 to only 11,078; and modern languages declined from 18,914 to 10,132. Moreover, the number of English degrees also declined from 56,094 to 26,006. So history is not alone.

I think the reasons for the decline are obvious. We are not emphasizing teaching enough, and we do not work hard enough on our teaching at the college level and in the secondary schools, including some AP courses. We tend to ride our own hobby horses instead of thinking about the students' broad needs.

However, this is only part of the explanation and probably the lesser part. In the first place, demography is against us. Many history majors have traditionally gone into teaching, but now--and for some time to come--jobs in the secondary schools in the social sciences will be very hard to come by. Moreover, the prestige of the teaching profession has declined, and there is little talk of doing anything about the situation in the social sciences. So students--especially bright students--look elsewhere. This situation will not change until the 1990s at the earliest.

Since the 1970s, college students have been turning away from liberal arts to professional programs. Thomas J. Moore's article in the The Washington Post (October 23, 1983), "Tinker, Tailor, Waitress, Clerk: Is It Worthwhile to Go to College?" provides a succinct if somewhat popularized analysis of the situation. (A more detailed, six-part version appeared in the Chicago Sun-Times.) Among Moore's conclusions are the following:

> "One of the most disturbing aspects of the current situation is its impact on liberal education. Traditionally, a liberal arts curriculum enabled a student to have it both ways. The student could pursue knowledge for its own sake and still usually end up with a professional, white collar job. But that is no longer the case, according to my analysis of the job status of the high school class of '72. [Moore did a computer analysis of a sample of 20,000 graduates of the high school class of 1972.]
>
> Less than half of those majoring in such fields as psychology, economics, history, English, art and music were in college level jobs three years after they left college.
>
> Not surprisingly, given that record, the number of liberal arts degrees has been declining rapidly. From 1975 to 1981, for example, the number of graduates with history degrees fell 43 percent. Sociology degrees fell 45 percent and English degrees declined 36 percent.

> The choice of a college major, I found, was the single largest determinant of a college graduate's subsequent success, or lack of it, in entering a college-level career."

I must add that Moore does not consider college a waste of time and money and that he believes there are good non-economic arguments to be made for college education. He is simply warning us--all of us--of some dramatic trends.

What to do? Recognize reality. Concede that history students, and other liberal arts majors, will be turning elsewhere. Encourage them to do it. Tell them to study what the market wants and needs. But also advise them to study subjects such as history. Urge them to become double majors, or to take a major in a professional program and a minor in history, or, better yet, a major in history and a minor in the other program. In sum, urge them to become educated persons, for their own satisfaction and their own good.

Patricia Lund Casserly, who has for more than a decade done extensive studies of AP students for ETS and the College Board, currently is engaged in another follow-up study of these students. Recently, during a visit to Eugene, where she was studying the subsequent development of AP students on our campus, she told me how impressed she was with these students, many of whom are in our Honors College or otherwise doing well. She also has been noticing, in Oregon and elsewhere, that AP students are using their AP credits to pursue more efficiently double majors and minors. As usual AP is a trend-setter. Colleges need to recognize what is going on. Pat also

told me what she said to one of our students who wanted to study literature but whose parents insisted that she study Computer Science. Take Computer Science but also take some lit courses, Pat told the girl, "for your soul." Pat reported that the young lady thanked her for saying that.

I would of course add, "and study history." Advise your students to pursue their career goals and enroll in history courses for the sake of body and soul. It is in their interests and ours to do that.